GOD WITH US
John 1:1-4; 14-18
December 17, 1978

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Each year at about this time, when the schedule begins to creak and groan with the added activity, when there doesn't appear to be the remotest possibility that all the cards will be addressed, gifts purchased and wrapped, parties attended, when we begin to detect the seasonal goodwill becoming testiness and irritability and impatience, - at just this time I remember an incident which occurred in my home several years ago. I've told this story before but it fits so well here I trust you'll forgive me for using it again. I had purchased a pressed-paper Nativity Tableau which was to be punched out and assembled, easily, the package promised: "cut along line X, fold A and insert in slot B." My youngest and I sat down after dinner to do the job which, of course, turned out to be rather complicated. Before long the table was littered with paper; sheep slightly bent, cattle folded wrongly, shepherds who refused to stand up and a manger that insisted on tilting. He was about four at the time, and surveying the chaos before us he asked, "Daddy, where is God in this mess?"

A good question, I thought at the time, and still do. In fact, it is the theological question which presents itself and while there may be lighter and less ponderous topics for the third Sunday in Advent, I invite you to think with me about this one this morning. Where, exactly, is God in this mess?

It is no secret that an American Christmas has long since generated its own head of steam and can do quite nicely without God - or the birth of Jesus, for that matter. The cynic inside me wants to conclude that the extravagance of an American Christmas is in direct proportion to the loss of basic belief in God: the more remote the idea of God becomes the more important it is to us to affirm something good about humanity. The fact is that an American Christmas has a life of its own, and that it condescends to borrow from us those elements of our story which are pleasant, touching and good for business: which is to say lots of lambs and cattle loving and not a word about a petty tyrant raging in his palace and ordering the murder of a few thousand Jewish babies.

Christmas is not necessarily about God at all and one of the reasons is that we don't know the answer to my son's question. We aren't sure where God is in this mess, if He is here at all. I had the privilege of hearing Professor Hans Kung, author of On Being a Christian, deliver a series of lectures this fall in which he argued persuasively that the question of God has suddenly become respectable again in academic circles. For several centuries, Kung points out, the most revolutionary and most influential scholarly thinking has regarded religion in general and the question of God in particular as irrelevant. In science, political theory and the social sciences, religion and its God have been seen as repressive, superstitious and the arch foe of human progress. It was religion and its God, after all, who clamped the lid on Galileo. It was in the name of the comfortable God of State religion that democracy was opposed throughout the western world - and until very recently in lands where the church was an important part of the establishment. Religion stood against the discoveries and theories of psychology and psychiatry, preferring to exorcise demons and burn witches instead of heal sick souls. Human enlightenment meant, in scholarly circles, liberation from all the vestiges of religion.

But, Kung maintains, that is over now. Nothing has failed so completely as the utopian vision of Karl Marx. There is far more to the human spirit than Sigmund Freud could explain and science, of all things, has come full circle, and now stands

gaping into a vast unknown, inviting theologians back into the conversation about the beginnings and meaning of human life. It is an exciting and challenging time if you happen to be a professional theologian. And yet, Professor Küng suggested, the biggest mistake a preacher can make is to assume that all the people who come to church on Sunday believe in God and understand what they believe. Rather the situation seems to be one of practical atheism. If god exists it simply doesn't matter.

The arts confirm the practical godlessness of the modern mind. The distinguished Swedish film director, Igmar Bergman, continues to turn out stark, bleak movies which critics recognize as the most brilliant work being done, nearly all of which are obsessed with the question. The New York Times Arts and Leisure section two weeks ago ran a major story on Bergman and commented, "When we are in Mr. Bergman's world, the presence of God - or the presence of God's absence - is overpowering." In a Bergman movie, The Serpent's Egg, a priest summarizes what the brilliant director perceives in modern life - "We live far away from God, so far away that he doesn't hear us when we pray for help. So we must help each other, give each other the forgiveness a remote God denies us." (NYT, 12/3/78). And Woody Allen, whom the Times regards as a "lesser imitator of Bergman", has gone on record that " there is no religious feeling that can make any thinking person happy." If art reflects life, it is fair to say that the question of God is still very much unresolved: that we live in a time of skeptical agnosticism - or practical atheism.

The unspeakable horror of Jonesville has forced the issue again. As is the case every time an airliner crashes or a baby dies of leukemia, so the suicide and murder of nine hundred people in a remote South American jungle raises the old and fundamental issue; How is it possible to believe in God in a world where evil is so rampant? Time Magazine, as I knew it would, asked the question in its Religion section this week. It will not go away - this persistent and relentless surfacing of demonic human evil. It flies in the face of everything we hold dear and want to believe. "How can people do that?" we ask, and what we are really saying is "How can God, if He exists, allow people to do that?"

People who want to believe in God have a problem dealing with human evil. The old constructs don't stand any longer. It just isn't possible to explain all evil as God's punishment for sin - at least with a straight face. And to tell someone who has just lost a baby to leukemia that it was God's mysterious will is to contradict everything we know about the God of the Bible. Who needs a God like that?

If we are going to believe in God at all, it had better be in a way that takes very seriously the human condition: a way that at least relates God to the fact of evil: a way that includes God - as participant - in the joys and tragedies of human life. God, if He exists at all, has His existence among us, not in some celestial hide-away in the clouds. And that, frankly, is what Christmas is about. Lambs and shepherds, cattle lowing and little baby to be sure: but more to the point, a God who got into human life with us, and whose existence will continue to be perceived and experienced in human life.

The Christian faith maintains that the only God there is, took on human flesh for a while and lived as Jesus of Nazareth - the Christ. Doctrinally the idea is known as the Incarnation: the enfleshing of God, and it is the very bottom line of Christian theology. Christian thinking about God begins, not with philosophic abstractions, but with the life of a particular man. The Incarnation - terribly

important, but also, frankly, terribly tedious. The early church fathers debated it endlessly: what is the relationship of the divine to the human in Christ? Was He of the same "essence" as the Father, or was it "substance"? There was a time when I thought that it was urgently important for my congregation to grapple with the third and fourth century debates about the nature of Christ, and as I think about those somber and slightly pompous sermons I am filled with gratitude for the sturdy souls who endured them with grace, and an occasional nap! What I have concluded, in the meantime, is that it isn't all that important to own a personally styled theology of Incarnation: that how Jesus of Nazareth was at once human and divine is no more available to my rather ordinary powers of reason than that incredible, astonishing phenomenon that occurs every single time a sperm cell and an ovum meet and new life appears. What I have concluded, after pondering it for a modest number of years, is that the earliest Christians didn't understand it either, but that somehow in this man Jesus they saw coming at them God himself. And while I love the stories of Christmas with a special and personal love, I have concluded that they become little more than pleasant but irrelevant sentimentality unless they pull us to a point of confrontation with this incredible claim: this baby - this man - this event - is God with us. And that is why, while I love Matthew for his Wise Men and Luke for his shepherds, the Christmas story is not complete for me without the mystical poetry of the Fourth Gospel, written perhaps a hundred years after the fact: "In the beginning was theWord: and the Word was with God; and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

John wrote later, long after the stories of Jesus' birth were known. His assignment was to tell the story to a world which spoke and thought in Greek. He chose a familiar Greek concept: the Logos - the mind and will and self-revealing nature of God: it is translated "the Word". It is the very nature of God to be in relationship with His people: to communicate with them. (Cicero complained that the gods of the Epicureans didn't do anything.) This God, the Fourth Gospel maintains, does things, acts, comes among His people in the life of a humble Jewish carpenter. That is the significance of the birth - this Jesus is God with us. The Word has become flesh. That is the orthodox Christian position. But Professor Kung was right, I think.

It is not an easy time to believe in God. Even the best of us have moments when the whole question seems terribly unresolved: when, instead of a joyful and satisfying sense of God's presence, we know nothing but an emptiness, a vacuum, a vague dis-ease that perhaps we really are alone and that this brief life is all there is. The doctrine of the Incarnation suggests to me that, in our humanness, if all we have to hold on to is a sense of God's absence, if all we have in moments of honest doubt is a sense of God's silence - we still have something. What I am learning, at least partially because I cannot forget Jesus himself at the moment of His death crying out that most human of cries, "My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me?" is that the reality of God is affirmed precisely by my sense of His absence.

On a wall in the Warsaw Ghetto was scratched a little poem that I regard as one of the bravest affirmations of faith ever written, and certainly one of the most beautiful:

> "I believe in the sun, even if it does not shine.
> I believe in love, even if I do not feel it.
> I believe in God, even if I do not see him."

(Hans Kung, Signposts for the Future, p.164).

The Incarnation suggests that God is not a remote potentate who pulls the strings for the puppet show on earth, but that He - God himself - has submitted to life, got into it with us. That means, in terms of evil and suffering, for instance, that God doesn't cause it: rather God feels it: and grieves with us, and weeps as we weep. The Incarnation means, in J B Phillips' words: "there is not disappointment or frustration, no pain or sorrow or failure, that He does not understand." (Good News, p.169).

And it means that God rejoices when we rejoice: that our laughter and love and happiness is as much music to His ears as it is for one another.

In terms of personal piety the Incarnation is radically relevant. The baby was born in a barn: the man lived a human life: - ate, drank, slept, was happy, got angry, hurt, doubted and died, a very human death. That means that if you want to be in touch with God, you don't need to wait till the general prayer at 11:15 on Sunday morning. It means that you don't have to go to a special place where it is assumed He is at home in a special way. The Incarnation means that the whole world is full of Him: that you will encounter none other than God in your office, classroom, at your dinner table, in the beauty parlor and on the golf course. The Incarnation points to a very worldly God who came to be with people where they were - and who continues to be present in human life - all of it.

It means, in very personal terms, that there is no area of your life about which God doesn't care and which lies outside His love and healing power. For too long we have denied the Incarnation by assuming that God is concerned about how we say our prayers but in sexual relations, for instance, abandons us to our own devices. God cares deeply about human life because He has lived it. He is available: He is a power to help and heal. It is personal, but it is not simply personal.

The Incarnation means that God cares deeply about the way life is lived in the world. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us", not as a sacred priest behind a holy altar, but as a man who lived his life fully: a man who grew up in a family, and knew hunger and weariness: a man who argued with the religious authorities and was arrested and executed by the state for treason. God cares, that is to say, about the quality of life in this world. He cares, that is to say, more about how poor people are treated than how wealthy people sing hymns. He cares more about how children are educated and the mentally retarded cared for, than about the properness of religious ritual. He cares more about peace and justice and integrity and fairness and compassion in the public and political sense, than about all the creeds of Christendom. God with us!

And it is the quiet but astonishing suggestion that the God who is, and who is with us so intimately, is a God of love: that we are loved with an eternal love: that in this vast universe and this bewildering life there is one reality more real than anything else, more real than death - the love of God in Jesus Christ: love incarnate: love alive and among us.

I have asked you, one week before Christmas, to leave the pleasant customs behind and think hard for a while. I have suggested that the birth of Jesus Christ is far more than a simple story: that it has to do with the most difficult and profound of questions. I have suggested that the God whose presence or absence haunts you is available to you here and out there in whatever life you live. And now I'm asking you to celebrate Christmas in a special and private way. Look for Him: watch for Him: open your life to Him.

Let me share with you a few sentences which meant a great deal to me as I read them this week - in the midst of "this mess" as it were. Malcolm Muggeridge wrote them...

> "Every happening, great and small...is a parable whereby God speaks to us; and the art of life is to get the message. In the same sort of way, listening to great music, or reading great literature, or standing before great buildings, an inner rhythm is detected, and the heart rejoices, and a light breaks, which is none other than God's love shining through all his creation."
>
> (Christ and the Media, p.25).

Look for Him! Watch for Him! Open your life to Him! And sometime in the days ahead He will be there and the Word will become flesh for you and the Christ will be born again in your life: and you can lift your voice in honest and abundant joy:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth: we have beheld His glory as of the only Son of the Father.

Amen.

God our Father, in the midst of our rejoicing over the birth of Your Son, deepen us: enlarge our thinking: push us to expand our vision. Help us to know again the truth and beauty and reality which You have given us: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.